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ABSTRACT

The minialist approach to social policy, especially concerning public education, has not worked because the assurance of minimal protection for the deprived also entails a rise in acceptable levels of attainment for those above the minimum, in order to preserve their competitive advantage. Also, particular minimums, such as universal elementary education, have rapidly become obsolete. The 1960's represented a major turning point in social policy--a shift away from providing services to producing results. Minimum competency testing is part of this trend because it promises to extend public responsibility from resources to results; yet it holds individuals responsible for attaining the results. There is evidence that competency testing will not work. The movement is growing in a political climate of short resources and shorter patience with professionals and their clients. There is no widely accepted method of selecting minimum competency tests, nor of determining whether the minimum has been achieved. More basically, there is a weak understanding of the factors influencing productivity; consequently, the ability to control relevant factors is doubtful. It is unlikely that schools will be able to remedy the failures that competency testing will define, and this could discredit the test instruments used to report failure. (CP)

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NATIONAL CONSORTIUM ON TESTING

STAFF CIRCULAR NO. 4

MINIMUMS, COMPETENCY TESTING, AND SOCIAL POLICY*

December 1978

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	MINIMALISM AND SOCIAL POLICY: EQUALITY	1
II.	MINIMALISM AND SOCIAL POLICY: CHANGE	5
III.	MINIMUMS, "INPUTS," AND "OUTPUTS"	8
IV.	MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTS AND A POLICY OF RESULTS	13
V.	ORIGINS OF MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING	18
VI.	THE VIABILITY OF MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING	22
VII.	CONCLUSION	28

I. MINIMALISM AND SOCIAL POLICY: EQUALITY

Administering tests to determine whether students have achieved "minimum competency" in particular subjects is a recent enthusiasm, but in certain respects it embodies an old tradition--to wit, the consistent tendency in U.S. social policy to promote provision of social minimums. Social policy--by which we mean governmental assumption of responsibility for common welfare--has in general taken shape in response to the sense that the welfare of some members of society has fallen below a minimal level of decency. It was such a belief that led Horace Mann and other reformers to campaign for public provision of primary schooling. It was a similar belief regarding incomes that led later reformers to initiate welfare and social security payments. In fact, social programs as diverse as Medicare and public housing have been thought of as providing a decent minimum of services or facilities for persons who could not do so for themselves. In most of these programs the hope has been that a decent minimum would help people to a better start in the race of life. Social policy has grown enormously since its inception in the early nineteenth century, but a great deal of the expansion can be accounted for either in the application of minimum protection to new domains or in the effort to increase minimums already provided.

Minimalism has not been without problems, and some of them are illuminating for students of minimum competency tests. One is a confusion about ends: social policy has been minimalist in practice, but it is typically conceived in egalitarian terms. This creates confusion concerning the actual character of policy, and often encourages disappointment over the results. From their

inception early in this century, for example, state school aid programs were organized to provide minimal funding for all school districts within states. Yet while the program design was purely minimalist (they were even called "foundation" grants), the programs were mostly understood and debated in egalitarian terms: they were presented in the framework of equality of educational opportunity, not a decent minimum of opportunity. As a result, when analysts and reformers weighed the programs' impact decades later, they judged them a failure, for fiscal inequality among districts within states of course persisted. Had the programs been evaluated in terms of their designed goal of providing a decent minimum, however, the judgment probably would have been very different.

Minimum protection is not, of course, inherently inconsistent with equality. In principle, raising floors in the provision of services would increase equality, as long as higher levels in the distribution do not also rise. But this has not been the case in the United States: as minimums have been established and increased, the whole distribution has also shifted upwards. In education, for example, social policy began in the 1840s with efforts to provide free, universal, elementary schooling. Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century the country gradually approached attainment of this goal. But as success grew nearer, eight years of elementary school came to seem increasingly inadequate. The reasons given for this included such factors as decreasing demand for juvenile labor, and a growing sense that economic progress required more formal training. But it was also true that the nearer the earlier minimum came to achievement, the clearer it became that if things were left at eight years of elementary school, a rough educational

equality soon would obtain among most Americans. For those who were at the bottom of the heap this would have been a great step forward, but for those in the growing lower-middle and middle classes, such rough equality would have meant that their children would lose any relative advantage which might accrue from formal schooling.

The solution was more schooling for the families who desired it--preferably at public expense--but at their own expense if necessary. On the average this preserved the relative advantage of middle class families without sacrificing general attainment of the initial lower minimum. As elementary enrollments increased during the last half of the nineteenth century, more and more students enrolled in high schools, and the number of these schools grew remarkably. At the beginning most secondary students were from middle class backgrounds, and their numbers grew as the elementary schools included more and more students from disadvantaged elements of American society. There were some fierce initial debates over whether secondary schools should be supported by public funds, but the struggle was not a long one: in the last half of the nineteenth century, secondary education was freely provided in more and more places. By the turn of the century secondary school was rapidly becoming compulsory. And later in the twentieth century, as secondary schools began to include more than middle class and academically inclined lower class students, the same story was played out at a higher level: as the old ceiling (high school attendance) came closer to becoming a new floor, middle class families began sending their children to college in record numbers.

Thus, one central feature of minimalist approaches in U.S. social policy

has been the implication of publicly provided minimums in private social and economic competition. This is not surprising. For the indices on which social minima are drawn are necessarily goods or services with wide social value: we do not extend services which no one much cares about. And competition for just these goods and services is widely encouraged: personal success is evaluated in terms of the accumulation of such things as schooling, money, housing, medical care, and the like. As a result, assuring a minimum level of provision in any sector for those hitherto deprived has thus also entailed a rise in acceptable levels of attainment for those above the minimum, in order to preserve their real or imagined competitive advantage.

We could, of course, imagine circumstances in which those above a new minimum would choose not to increase their advantage. Such choices could be discouraged by criminal penalties or tax assessments, or long-term economic stagnation could make the costs prohibitive for most Americans. But the fact is that none of these circumstances prevailed in the century following the initiation of social policy. On the contrary, the ten decades between the 1830s and the 1930s were marked by terrific economic growth, and a flowering of the competitive ethic in American life. As a result, the provision of minimums in social policy for education and other social service sectors seemed to operate as a sort of social signal that everyone's portion of such services must rise--or perhaps had risen. Minimalism appears to have been a relatively conflict-free way of improving life somewhat for those at the bottom of the American heap, because economic growth made it possible for those above the bottom to improve their own situation.

The chief consequence of this has been to dampen the potential equalizing

effects of minimalism, and heighten the tension between egalitarian expectations and minimalist realities. The state school aid programs mentioned earlier, for example, saw a steady escalation of minimum levels of provision, but only at the price of a similar escalation all along the distribution. Welfare payments have increased over the years, but they have not kept pace with increases in real income. And despite the fact that there has been a substantial increase in welfare programs since the 1930s, there is very little evidence that these have had an effect on overall inequalities in the distribution of income. Minimalist policies are typically couched in egalitarian terms, but these terms are inappropriate. The policies were not designed to reduce inequality but to establish a floor of social decency. If they had been intended to reduce inequality, some device to prevent competition from inflating the whole distribution would have been required. No such devices were even contemplated.

One hope for MCT programs--and part of the advertising in many places--has been that by establishing minimum standards, the academic achievement especially of the poor or disadvantaged could be improved. If MCT programs work this would be true only insofar as the problems of these students are absolute, not relative--e.g., illiteracy as opposed to slow reading. But to the extent that the problem of students at the lower end of the test distribution is simply that they are lower in the distribution, some caution would be warranted. For there are only a few cases in the history of U.S. social policy which provide encouragement for the idea that minimalism will reduce inequality.

II. MINIMALISM AND SOCIAL POLICY: CHANGE

This analysis suggests other salient features of minimalism. One of

these is the tendency toward status inflation with which minimalist social policy seems to be associated. As we noted above, the establishment of many social policy minimums seems to mark off a point which most members of society seek to exceed. At least in U.S. social policy, minimums do not appear to represent a decent and broadly acceptable standard of provision, but rather a stigmatized standard acceptable only for those inhabiting the lower reaches of society. As a result--and this is the second feature we wish to note--particular minimums have rapidly become obsolete. It was, for example, little more than a generation after universal elementary education was nearly achieved that American educators were striving to achieve universal secondary education. The result of such escalation is that today's acceptable minimum is tomorrow's social disaster. It is, of course, generally true that in the social realm there are no fixed standards, only relative ones. In the 1930s, for example, $15 per week was considered to be a minimum income level for an American family. By the 1960s, however, even after accounting for the effects of inflation this figure had more than doubled (Jencks et al, 1975, pp. 4-5). In the United States, economic growth has been so rapid, and social competition so intense, that many social minimums have rapidly gone out of date.

It is important to note, though, that the rapid obsolescence of social policy minimums is not a given. A slowing of economic growth, or a relaxation of social and economic competition could lead to much more stability. But such conditions might also make it much more difficult to secure political consensus on decent minimums. For if our analysis is correct, one explanation for relatively generous miniumums in certain sectors of social policy may have

been the general recognition that many others not in need could easily exceed the minimums. If that sense were to diminish sharply as a result of hard times or of the attainment of some "natural" ceiling, the story might change. Something of this sort may even now be occurring in education, where it seems that four years of college may remain as a rough ceiling on educational attainment, leaving relatively little opportunity for continued status inflation into post-graduate school. Under such conditions two developments can be noted. One is a gradual but steady decrease of gross inequality in educational attainment (measured as years of school completed). Another contrary but related development is internal differentiation of post-secondary schools, in which a variety of low-status options appear, such as junior and community colleges, proprietary vocational schools, remedial schools, and the like. In an earlier time this occurred at the lower end of secondary education. These low-status options meet real demand from new students, but they also preserve status distinctions within a system which has seemingly reduced inequality. It is a nice question as to whether inequality has been actually reduced or merely re-defined. Indeed, in light of diminished inequality in years of schooling, minimum competency testing might be viewed as a new means of status differentiation. From this perspective it is not surprising that MCT enthusiasts are eager to reestablish the social meaning of the high school diploma.

Thus, minimalism is neither as simple nor as appealing an approach to social policy as it seems at first glance. Much of its appeal lies in the seeming self-evidence of a particular minimum at a particular point in time, yet this appeal is transitory. Social policy minimums are, in fact, remarkably relative, due both the unforeseeable historical changes and to the more readily

predictable obsolescence consequent upon the implication of policy minimums in social and economic competition. In U.S. social policy the durability of the minimalist approach has rested not only on the flawed belief that minimum protection will substantially reduce inequality, but also on the illusory belief that policy minimums are stable.

III. MINIMUMS, "INPUTS" AND "OUTPUTS"

Change has been a central feature of minimalism in social policy, but the change of most importance to our discussion is not a simple increase in floors or ceilings in the delivery of resources. Rather, our chief subject is a shift from delivering resources to securing results. For most of the history of U.S. social policy, efforts have focused on the provision of services: building better housing, creating facilities that will reduce hazards to public health, or improving schools' resources. It was, of course, assumed that providing these resources would have results: better schools would produce better students; better sanitation would improve health and life; higher standards of housing would improve families' abilities to cope socially and produce economically. But earlier in this century these assumptions were rarely explicit. They were simply an essential part of that modern climate of opinion in which it seemed self-evident that by creating better, and more efficient institutions, men could make themselves over into healthier, wiser and more humane beings. The aims of social policy seven or eight decades ago seemed so simple as to be beyond question: providing decent services and better institutions in a society littered with evidence of need.

By the middle of the last decade, however, the connection between providing resources and producing results had become more uncertain, and a good deal more

skepticism marked public discourse. Health policy, for example, was no longer viewed simply in terms of providing decent medical care and insuring against threats to public health. Rather, in the face of dramatically rising costs and often surprisingly intractable problems, the issue came to be whether existing health care arrangements could efficiently produce the desired results. Productivity quickly became a central concern in many sectors of social policy, as attention shifted to the results of investment in the common welfare.

This was nowhere as striking as in education. The concern with results was seen first on a large scale in the efforts of civil rights activists, early in the 1960s, over schools' treatment of poor and minority students. Reformers and reform-minded researchers, seeking to show how poorly disadvantaged children were doing, demanded that school systems release test results school-by-school. The reformers assumed that the low performance resulted from schools' indifference or hostility. This concern for results carried over into the first wave of Great Society programs--notably Head Start and ESEA Title I--where it merged with Johnsonian enthusiasm for the results-oriented "systems analysis" management techniques then epitomized by Robert McNamara. The upshot was an increasing emphasis, in the late 1960s, on evaluation of social programs. Between 1966 and 1968 the studies and evaluation plans multiplied at an astonishing rate: the Westinghouse-Ohio evaluation of Head Start, G.E. Tempo Title I study, the Belmont System, the Follow Through evaluation, Head Start Planned Variation experiment, and a myriad of others. Every one of them weighed the impact of programs in terms of school outcome measures, not in terms of service delivery. And all used one sort of outcome--

students' scores on standardized tests of achievement or ability. Results were the focus of social policy in education by the end of the 1960s.

But the new focus was not reassuring, for the new studies seemed to sever the long-assumed connection between resources and results: the studies regularly reported that special programs seemed to have no special effects. The upshot was a growing skepticism about schools' effectiveness, and about the wisdom of investment in education. These doubts were reinforced by a succession of large-scale studies which examined the relationship between school resources and school outcomes. The Coleman report and its academic progeny found little or no differential effectiveness among schools--that is to say, differences in resources and facilities were unrelated to differences in student outcomes. In the popular, and mistaken, jargon, schools "didn't make a difference."

The jargon profoundly misconstrued the research, but it nicely captured the sense of disillusion and skepticism which accumulated in the wake of all the attention to results. Writing in Science, Robert Nichols (1966) described the Coleman report as "literally of revolutionary significance....these findings stand like a spear pointed at the heart of the cherished American belief that equality of educational opportunity will increase the equality of educational achievement." On the basis of the Coleman report findings, an editorial in the same periodical accused America's educators of having no scientific basis for their activities (Morrisett, 1966). And the same period saw a roughly similar experience in other fields: research and analysis in health, manpower training and drug abuse programs revealed non-existent or surprisingly modest connections between resources and results. The more attention given to this

connection, the more dubious it seemed. Many analysts began to think that inherited assumptions about the efficacy of resources had been mistaken.

All of this was a great shock, because it violated the old and honorable Enlightenment assumption that better institutions would produce better people. And in retrospect, the next step seems inevitable: if adding resources didn't add to results, then perhaps the way to get results was to somehow insist on them. This did not violate inherited ideas about the positive relation between resources and results, but seemed to take into account evidence that the relation was not automatic.

The notion of insisting on results has been much discussed in various policy areas, but most of the action has been in education. Probably the first important step was performance contracting--i.e., using money incentives to assure that teachers or students achieved specified levels of performance. Several experiments were set afoot, but the results were soon pronounced a failure (Gramlich and Koshel, 1975). Soon thereafter several lawsuits sought to establish a constitutional obligation on the part of school districts to bring students to some particular level of performance. The suits failed to persuade the courts. At roughly the same time, dozens of states implemented "accountability" schemes of one sort or another, and several even tried to link state aid to local schools' achievement of some performance level. But while these state programs produced both paper and anxiety in the education establishment, no other results were forthcoming.

The failure of these early efforts should not distract from the fact that they may signal a major turning point in social policy--a shift away from policies that aspire to distribute resources more fairly toward policies which seek to change the distribution of results. It is difficult to imagine

a change of greater moment for social policy in education. One large element in the change is a potential for greatly expanded state responsibility for the common welfare. The past has already seen a very considerable growth of state responsibility: providing a decent minimum of schooling, public health, welfare, social security, and the like has vastly increased the services for which government is responsible, and as a result government has expanded. But trying to ensure that certain minimal social results are achieved--such as minimal competencies in reading or personal health--would extend that responsibility far beyond its present bounds. Assuring results, after all, is far more difficult than delivering resources, and this greater difficulty would carry government into realms of action hitherto unknown.

Were such a change carried through, it might well alter the balance between individual and social responsibility, for society would have to assume much of the responsibility for producing outcomes in sectors like health and education. Hitherto this responsibility has been left to individuals, subject only to the constraint of resources sufficient to create an equal opportunity (but leaving responsibility for the outcomes to the individuals). The only alternative to the direct assumption of social responsibility would be a social mechanism to motivate individuals' achievement of outcomes. Alternatively, this end might be sought through incentives: society might punish or reward individuals for their success or failure in achieving outcomes. Either alternative would be quite a change. Whether society assumed greater responsibility for producing outcomes, or greater responsibility for rewards or punishments, is in some ways of less consequence than the assumption of the responsibility itself.

To say that the change toward a results-oriented social policy would be

momentous is not to say that it would work. The approach assumes, for example, that man-made environments, or individual will or motivations, can be powerful enough to produce those better results we would like from schooling or health care. It also assumes that these more powerful environments, or rewards and punishments, could be decently managed by governments, in ways consistent with liberty. And it assumes that we can learn enough about the social and individual processes by which results occur to engineer their production more deliberately. Such assumptions are a major part of our intellectual inheritance, but they are not demonstrably true.

IV. MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTS AND A POLICY OF RESULTS

Worries about such matters have so far not diminished enthusiasm for results-oriented policy in education. In fact, one of the most important signs of the enthusiasm is the minimum competency testing movement. Since the early 1970s testing programs of this sort have gained remarkable popularity. As things now stand a clear majority of states has taken some action in the direction of minimum competency testing, and many have operating programs. The programs differ in many respects--including the grade levels and substantive areas involved, the role of such tests in decisions about graduation or promotion, and the presence or absence of remedial help. Nearly all the programs seek at least two things, however. They aspire to define minimum learning outcomes for students in a variety of academic areas, and they seek, in one way or another, to insure that these standards are satisfied. None make it clear how this satisfaction will occur.

But while MCT is part of a shift toward results in social policy, it also seems to be a move away from social responsibility for policy goals. For while

MCT retains the responsibility for getting minimum standards in the hands of the state, the new programs shift the burden for satisfying minimums from society to individuals. Up until this time, U.S. social policy has been solidly founded on the notion that society was responsible for providing a minimum of goods or services to those in need or at risk. With MCT, however, responsibility appears to have partly shifted: society is responsible for setting minimums, but individuals (with some remedial help in a few cases) are responsible for achieving them.

The apparent shift in responsibility is partly inevitable: in education, outcomes are mostly simple indices of individual performance. How could the state be held responsible for making individuals perform? Some other societies do try, but in the U.S. in the 1970s, it is still much easier to believe that individual test performance is primarily the responsibility of individuals. Of course, we no longer believe that the provision of school resources is an individual responsibility, and in certain respects this is only habit. We are now used to the idea that the state is responsible for school resource provision, but if this were the 1830s the notion would hardly seem natural. It would be nearly revolutionary. But if some of the problem is only history, in certain respects there is also a matter of moral belief. Performance on a test is thought to be inherently much more the result of an individual's own work and ability than his family's abilities to afford school resources. It would thus be difficult to avoid interpreting scores on minimum competency tests as largely the result of individual ability, effort, and preparation.

Some minimum competency testing programs do assume responsibility for some remedial work, and many educators now accept the notion that environmental

factors can impede children's ability to perform well on tests. But at the moment such acknowledgements occur in a moral atmosphere in which individual responsibility for intellectual work is still pre-eminent. As a result, it is at least for the time being quite likely that those who fall below these minimums will be held primarily responsible for the failure. And this marks a distinct change in ideas about the responsibility for achieving social policy minimums. Minimum competency testing not only announces that the important criteria for success in social policy are outcomes, but it also implies that while society is responsible for establishing minimum levels of performance, individuals are responsible for attaining them.

Thus, while the new emphasis on results seems to promise an expansion of social responsibility for welfare, the conception of responsibility for results embodied in the programs seems to promise a contraction of social responsibility. One wonders what to make of the seeming contradiction.

The most obvious possibility is that this is the beginning of a new, results-oriented epoch in social policy, and we might thus expect confusion and contradiction. When America first moved toward the public assumption of responsibility for primary schooling in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, there was a similar muddle. Some advocated the extension of state responsibility while others opposed it. Some early efforts at public education produced governmentally operated schools, but others relied on public subsidies to secular schools. Still others involved public subsidies to religious schools. In at least one case a private corporation ran the "public" schools. It was unclear exactly where the new schools would get their children or how it

would be decided who could attend or not. Practices on these and other points varied considerably. One could thus argue that just as conceptions about the meaning of "public" and "responsibility" were quite unclear and sometimes seemingly contradictory at the outset of social policy in education, so are ideas about the scope of responsibility for a social policy of results now unclear. If past experience is any guide, the confusions will clear up as initial experimentation settles into a pattern, and we should expect a gradual expansion of public responsibility for outcomes.

Another possibility is that the seeming contradiction concerning responsibility for results reflects a deep ambivalence about the character of social policy. MCT could be seen to embody two contrary tendencies in American social policy. One is the idea that society must assume responsibility for those who, for reasons significantly unrelated to their own effort or ability, are at risk or unable to provide for themselves at a minimal level of social decency. The other is reflected in the tendency to stigmatize the objects of social policy, and to use policy to that end. Certainly many social policy minimums in the United States have been thus stigmatized, either as a result of social and economic competition or as a result of specific policy procedures. Earlier in this essay, for example, we explored how first elementary and later high school education came to seem inadequate, and thus in a sense to be stigmatized--to seem a form of under-education. This was not the sole direct result of policy, but a consequence of the interaction between terrific competition over school attainment and a social policy which supported public provision of minimums, but did not sufficiently value equality to support public restriction of ceilings. In such cases minimums assume

the status, in social and economic competition, of things to be avoided by being exceeded.

There are, of course, many examples of policy taking a more direct role in creating a stigma. Public housing is stigmatized specifically because of the character of policy. What is provided is, for the most part, barren, ugly, and set apart from its surroundings. These qualities are habitually identified with stigmatized institutions, an identification we recognize when saying that a public housing project "looks like a prison" or a state hospital. Public housing thus partakes of the character of a last resort rather than the character of modest decency. Or, to take a more familiar case, recipients of welfare have traditionally been stigmatized by policy. There have been a variety of signals: humiliating means tests and application procedures; searches of recipients' homes without even minimal observation of constitutional guarantees; programs of work-relief which make it plain that the recipients of welfare are being punished for their status. In these different ways policy sets its objects apart from society, and marks them as inadequate and inferior.

It is not difficult to identify such tendencies within MCT. The movement to extend social responsibility from resources to results may appear humane, but efforts to set minimum standards without assuming social responsibility for those who fall below them clearly seem of a piece with the old tendency to stigmatize the objects of social policy. The new test minimums may turn out to be a sort of educational means-test, setting aside the debris of American education from everyone else. There is, after all, quite a history of just such endeavors in education during the last seven or eight

decades. Some of the most telling examples include: the use of "general" curriculum tracks in secondary schools as a dumping ground; the use of special schools for the same purposes (one thinks of New York City's "600" schools, for example); the role of special education classes in many school systems, at least until recently; and, of course, the way ability grouping in elementary schools has often been employed. In each of these cases there was a policy rationale in which the specially created categories of school were intended to offer carefully designed treatment, support, or encouragement for those in need. Sometimes that happened. But often it didn't, for reasons --whether fiscal, social or psychological--associated with the stigmatized character of the "special" educational categories.

Minimum competency testing may thus reinforce an old tendency in American education to confuse special needs with what Erving Goffman termed "spoiled identity." States and localities may not use the categories specially created as a device for improving the condition of those in need and repairing their connections to everyone else, but as a means of separating and stigmatizing them.

V. ORIGINS OF MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

Which emphasis will be borne out? Is MCT a progressive shift of attention in social policy to provision of outcomes, as a means of enhancing educational equality, or is it more a new means for status differentiation? Prediction in a matter of this sort would be foolish. Not only is the future intractably resistant to our forecasts, but the two tendencies outlined above are not mutually exclusive. Minimum competency testing presently embodies both themes, and is likely to do so in the future. The question is

what balance we may expect between these long-standing tendencies in U.S. social policy. For the short run, at least, we may learn something on this point from a review of the circumstances in which the MCT movement arose: has it been marked primarily by generous or punitive impulses?

Of course, some of the important influences which have contributed to the movement for minimum competency tests are quite neutral on this query. One major factor of this sort has been the spread of input-output conceptions of social organization. The idea that schools, hospitals, and government agencies could be thought of like factories--as processing human raw materials and creating human outputs, and therefore as being more or less efficiently productive--owes a great deal to the influence of economic ideas, both scientific and popular, on other social sciences and on social thought generally. This way of thinking about social life may be appropriate or not, but it has contributed greatly to the intellectual and political climate in which MCT seems sensible. Similarly, it might be argued that education is particularly vulnerable to results-oriented policy and evaluation, because, unlike other policy sectors, in education it is possible to count the outputs as well as the inputs. Students, after all, do take tests, and the results are chiefly quantitative. Patients leaving a hospital are not scored on an inventory of health, however, nor do social security recipients fill out an annual twenty-item scale covering the economic and social impact of the payments. Even more simply, no one can tell us how much health they have, much less how much security they experience. By contrast, anyone can tell us how much education he or she has. Schooling is experienced in terms of discrete quantitative entities--years, semesters, and test scores--

and in this respect it is unlike most other social services. This property--this common quantitative language for discussing people's achievement in education--makes education particularly susceptible to input-output analysis.

These factors help to explain why results-oriented policy has taken hold so quickly in education, but one must look elsewhere for evidence of the possible political implications of the new policy orientation. One critical area is the extent to which the minimum competency programs take responsibility for dealing with those whose competency is less than minimal. The outlook here is not promising. In Florida's minimum competency testing scheme, for example, very little, if any, attention seems to have been given to the issue of remediation prior to the startling finding in fall 1977 that 40 to 50% failed portions of that state's test (Fisher, 1978). Even in Massachusetts, with one of the most liberal approaches to minimum competency testing in the form of a program of "basic skills improvement," the signs are not auspicious. The purpose of the Massachusetts program is to "improve the attainment of basic skills competency by students...not to establish a new condition for promotion or graduation" (Massachusetts State Board of Education, August 1978). Yet the purpose of the Massachusetts policy is not to establish a new or separate instructional program beyond the support services normally provided in public schools, and indeed the Massachusetts program was predicated on the assumption that the basic skills improvement program would not cost anything extra.

Unhappily, nearly everywhere one finds evidence of either parsimonious or punishing inclinations. MCT has gained momentum in a political climate of short resources and shorter patience with professionals and their clients.

Questions about the efficacy of the social service professions arising from the weak evidence on results, for example, occurred at roughly the peak of an unprecedented period of assertiveness by those professions, just as a major public reaction against the assertiveness was beginning to build. Questions from research about the results of investing in social service programs for the needy began to be raised just at the peak of a period of effective political organization by blacks, other minority groups, and welfare recipients--which is to say just at the outset of a powerful political backlash. Questions about social policy, which under other circumstances might have had no particular political coloration, have taken on a profoundly pessimistic and even punishing aspect. California voters were urged to vote for Proposition 13, for example, not just as a reaction against taxation, but to defeat busing for school integration, or to oppose welfare payments. The pinched condition of most budgets in social agencies is understood not simply as a consequence of hard times, but as a reaction to liberal reform that doesn't "work." In the present climate, the general worry about getting one's money's worth has become not simply a comment on corruption or economic constraints, but part of a broad opposition to increased spending on social welfare programs of doubtful efficacy. Minimum competency testing occurs in a policy climate in which neither social agencies nor the objects of their services are to be trusted, a climate in which it seems necessary either to punish professionals and clients by reducing or removing funds, or to somehow try to guarantee that they will produce the desired results. In such a time the characteristic reflex is to blame both providers and recipients of social services for any failure to meet public expectations. It would not be surprising if MCT provided more ammunition for this reflex.

VI. THE VIABILITY OF MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING

One reason this seems particularly likely is the lack of much evidence that minimum competency testing could be successful. It is, of course, impossible to be certain on this point. In 1860 public support for high schools seemed an unwise idea to many Americans, and in 1954 the desegregation of Southern schools certainly struck most as entirely unworkable. The wisdom or workability of social innovations is rarely clear in advance. But in the absence of a sure-fire forecast, one can identify some of the elements probably required for an output-oriented minimums policy to work in education. One would be a face-valid conception of the minimum. In the 1930s a modest subsistence seemed a face-valid retirement income, and this helped social security to become a reality. In the 1840s--there being mostly only primary schools--providing such schools for all had a broad social face-validity. One might argue that if the minimum is seriously in dispute, and if there is no broadly acceptable way to settle the dispute, minimalism will not work even if there is agreement on other points. President Nixon's abortive Family Assistance Plan may be an example of a minimum so lacking in broad social face-validity that it could not be made policy.

Does such a minimum with broad social face-validity exist among educational outcomes? The answer is unclear, for while there appears to be a good deal of popular disagreement and uncertainty about what the right outcomes are, it is widely agreed that such skills as reading and mathematics are essential "competencies". There is much disagreement, however, about what else is essential. Some state programs include little else, while others include "competencies" of a social, personal, and attitudinal nature. These

differences seem unlikely to be resolved by argument or evidence. After all, education has a multitude of possible aims, and debates during the past century have seen persistent disagreement about which of these deserved inclusion on the public agenda.

It does not seem impossible, though, that consensus could crystallize around a minimum core of skills, despite the absence of logic or evidence. Logic and evidence, after all, have never been requisites of social action. But even so, broadly acceptable minima might be impossible. For there are deep and continuing differences among specialists about how to define competency in areas like reading or math, which everyone agrees are essential. In reading there is a long-standing dispute between advocates of decoding and partisans of comprehension, and in math there is disagreement about the virtues of what is termed problem-solving ability as opposed to computational skills. In standardized tests such differences are often resolved by including the competing notions, but it is not clear that this solution would work in defining and testing competencies.

On the other hand, more encouraging evidence can be found in the apparently wide acceptance which the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests have achieved. The NAEP tests were the subject of bitter disagreement, but after being adopted they gained fairly widespread legitimacy. Thus, despite the disagreements it is possible that a particular MCT battery could be widely adopted, seem workable, and <u>become</u> a socially valid minimum.

But in order to be workable, two other criteria probably would have to be satisfied as well. One, usually present when policy minimums have successfully been established, is a simple and plausible way of determining whether

the minimum has been achieved. In the case of input-oriented minimums this is fairly easy. One can know how many dollars the government pays a retired person, or whether primary schools have been provided, or how many children are attending. One can even know what proportion of all children in an age group attend, and how far they go. Each of these measures involves simple counting on indices already widely known and believed to be sure--dollars, or years of school, or numbers of people. The counting is often difficult because it is on a large scale, and even simple data are sometimes hard to find. But such counting is not difficult because the conceptual character or validity of measures is in doubt. By contrast, decent housing may be an example of a minimum that has been difficult to achieve because of such conceptual problems. Ideas about what decent housing might be seems to vary widely, despite the long history of U.S. census work on the matter. Officials and commentators cannot agree about what the government ought to provide, or about the quality of what it did provide in public housing. They don't seem to be able to find a simple measure of quality analagous to income, or years of schooling.

In education there are some minima like those mentioned here--such as years of school completed. High school graduation, for example, was for a long time a widely face-valid measure of a social policy minimum. But most outcome measures seem not to be like this. In education the obvious case in point is tests. Despite widespread agreement among parents and professionals that what tests measure is very important, there are only a few cases of agreement about what tests are the right ones to use (e.g., the SAT, or the N.Y. Regents exams), or about what level on tests is the minimum necessary. All of the

states which have operating MCT programs use some sort of test, and other states are developing tests. But the tests are all different, both in subject matter focus, difficulty, and other substantive respects. They differ in other technical properties as well. This variety in minimum competency testing nicely parallels the variety which has long existed in school programs using commercial tests. It suggests a point of some importance: while testing is seen as a legitimate activity, in only a few cases has a given test ever achieved pre-eminent legitimacy in its own realm. In standardized achievement testing, one reason for this may be that when teachers, parents, or students read several different tests of the same subject matter, they notice differences but find no intuitively appealing or broadly accepted way of deciding which test is best. Test experts have the same difficulty. According to some criteria, traditional intelligence tests have the highest technical quality, but such tests have little professional or public support at present. Another reason, more encouraging to MCT advocates, may simply be that few government agencies have tried to pre-empt a field (as the N.Y. Regents did), and that few tests have been linked to a particular aspect of decision-making (as the SAT is). Thus, while there are some reasons to expect confusion to continue with minimum competency testing (especially since many of the programs purport to measure competencies not simply to succeed in school, but in life), there are other considerations which suggest that tests might gain exclusive or near-exclusive dominance in a field or a political jurisdiction.

Finally, and perhaps most problematic, in every successful minimalist social program there seems to be a relatively simple way of satisfying the

minimum standard. The government, for example, has so far produced social security payments with remarkable accuracy and regularity. The same thing can be said of the production of welfare payments, the provision of school resources, and the delivery of health care. This does not mean everything about the nature of delivery of the goods and services in question is manageable, or even understandable. Not all influences on the amount of social security payments are controllable by government. Nor can government control important variations in the character of the teaching force, such as generational changes in their values, or in the patterns of their recruitment to the profession. But in all of these areas government has so far been able to understand enough and control enough to deliver the prescribed minimum of money, or teachers, or housing, or medical care.

As everyone knows by now, this is not as reliably true in the production of social policy outcomes. For one thing, even though we understand influences on the provision of resources quite imperfectly in many respects, we understand the creation of outcomes much less well. There is, of course, no question that schools are effective in teaching skills: algebra, French, and geography, just like large areas of reading, are not learned spontaneously; schools teach them. But there is a very weak understanding of the factors which make some students, teachers, classrooms or schools more productive than others in the same subjects. All the evidence thus far suggests there are important differences, but it seems to suggest that there are no uniform causes of these differences. They seem to be the result of complex interactions among individuals, settings, times and places. Thus, we know that establishing schools where there are none will create competencies where they

were previously weak or non-existent. And we know that a major increase in the amount of schooling--or the amount in a given subject--will increase average competencies across the board or in that subject. But we do not know very much about creating differential competencies within the same broad levels of provision.

What is more, if our understanding is weak, our ability to control the relevant factors is even more precarious. For one thing, as the previous discussion suggests, we don't know what to control. For another, controlling some of the things which might turn out to be relevant could be a violation of law and custom. Reformers have long argued, for example, that very intense environments may be the only way to remedy environmentally-induced inadequacies in schools skills: social theorists as diverse as Robert Owen and James Coleman have urged the creation of boarding schools for the poor. Such a policy, however, would violate custom, and might be subject to all the abuses we associate with other institutions specially designed for or primarily populated by the poor. In addition, many of the things which might have to be controlled in order to seriously affect outcomes may be uncontrollable within the present social order--such as early child-rearing practices, teachers' attitudes or verbal ability, or students' motivation.

None of these caveats about producing outcomes is certain, but taken all together they seem a powerful caution about the capacity of schools to satisfy the standards established by MCT programs. There is certainly much discouraging evidence on this score from the last twenty years' experience with remedial and compensatory education. If this conclusion is roughly correct, then it seems quite likely that MCT programs, even if established

in a spirit of generosity and social concern, may be unable to deal fruitfully with those who fail. Absent any reliable means of remediation, it is difficult to imagine what constructive purpose could be served by large-scale public announcements of failure. Minimum competency testing may be thus caught between two problematic alternatives: reducing the minimums to levels which would fail only a few in order to avoid stigma and the consequent reaction; or setting minimums higher, with the likely consequence that both the schools and students will be blamed for the ensuing failures.

VII. CONCLUSION

In a certain sense, then, minimum competency testing simply presents old unsolved technical problems in new form. Standardized tests have never resolved disagreements about the nature of subject matter, because subject matter specialists cannot resolve them. And standardized tests cannot decide what competency is; they can only define competency by referencing all scores to an average or criterion score. Competent students are those who do better than other students or than the criterion. One might reasonably argue, in fact, that minimum competency tests took these old problems, removed them from the obscurity to which they were carefully consigned, and enshrined them as the centerpiece of the new policy. It seems a curious approach.

Yet while the technical viability of minimum competency tests is no small concern, this has not been our sole, or even chief focus. Instead we have tried to locate minimum competency testing within the broader context of U.S. social policy. In this connection we have argued that this new testing movement represents a curious blend of old and new. It embodies

old themes--the emphasis on minimalism, and the ambivalence between stigmatizing and helping tendencies in social policy--but gives them a paradoxical new twist. Minimum competency testing seems progressive because it promises to extend public responsibility from resources to results. Yet it seems conservative because it promises to contract public responsibility by shifting the burden from society to individuals.

Thus, the MCT movement harnesses a measurement technology of dubious adequacy to powerful pressures for results, all in the context of a political climate marked by strong punitive elements. Minimum competency testing programs will make public judgments about students' failure to learn, and by implication at least, about schools' failure to teach, even though experience and research strongly suggest that the test instruments are usually poor, and that we are far from being able to remedy the failures revealed. If the matter were not so serious it would be laughable: the only reliable way we have of reducing failure in MCT programs is to reduce the cut-off points on the tests.

The problems evident here seem unlikely to recede. The last two decades have seen a remarkable increase of concern about results in social policy, but as time has passed this concern has become less hopeful. No idea has been more central to American social policy than the inherited notion that many social defects can be remedied by improving the environment, and nothing has been more unsettling than the evidence that creating the new institutions, or providing more resources, does not always or even regularly improve results. As evidence from both systematic research and casual observation has accumulated, questions about inherited liberal doctrine have mounted. Some commentators

have portrayed the uncertain evidence on results as a sign of a crisis in liberal social policy--even, perhaps, as evidence of its impending collapse. While that strikes us as a little premature, it is not easy to overstate the concern and pessimism consequent on the shift of attention to policy outcomes.

We have tried to draw attention to two consequences of this situation. One concerns the effects of MCT programs: because of the uncertain state of the schools' ability to thus far do a convincing job in remedial education, it is likely that educational institutions will be unable to remedy the failures MCT programs will define. And that would probably simply worsen the situation MCT programs were intended to correct. For what else can the failure of programs aimed at improving results do? It could discredit the test instruments which reported the failure; it could further undermine confidence in the schools which were supposed to produce the results, or remedy the failure; or it could encourage onlookers to blame the students. None seem particularly appealing.

In some respects, then, the most hopeful sign would be if the reports of MCT programs were simply ignored. Certainly much worthy information meets this fate, and one should never underestimate the public's ability to yawn at a critical juncture. But if current enthusiasm for school outcomes continues, we cannot expect understanding to keep pace. This period is one of great uncertainty about many long-standing assumptions in social policy--especially uncertainty about the extent to which social service institutions can produce the results they advertised. One consequence of this has been a considerable confusion, both about the possible scope of social policy and about the potential effectiveness of social services. The confusion is of course not yet

untangled, nor should we expect it to be in the near future. Absolutely basic questions have been raised, and it will take a long time for new experience and new investigations to put things in better focus. In the meantime it makes sense to realize that MCT, like many other policy initiatives of this time, may be more a symptom of the disruption of our ideas about social policy than a solution to the disorder in our minds. Minimum competency testing is part of a large but somewhat incoherent effort to come to terms not only with unsettled ideas about the effectiveness of social services, but also with greater dissatisfaction than we have previously known. The new efforts to produce results always appear in the form of a declaration, but in a certain sense they are a question, perhaps even a worry: can our institutions be trusted to do the work we believed they could?

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